Decision Memo
Rancho Deluxe Vegetation Project
U.S. Forest Service
Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest
Pintler Ranger District

BACKGROUND

The Rancho Deluxe Project is located on the Pintler Ranger District of the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest in Powell County, MT, approximately nine miles west-northwest of Deer Lodge, MT, and eight miles south of Gold Creek, MT. The project area is approximately 4,075 acres and lies on the east side of the Flint Creek mountain range. Local communities rely on the Flint Creek landscape for clean water, healthy rangelands, wood products, and recreation. Many Montana residents and visitors value the high-quality hunting and fishing in this area. The project area includes the Flint Foothills and Flint Uplands management areas of the Clark Fork Flint Landscape.

The Rancho Deluxe project was developed through a collaborative process. The Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) originally proposed the project to the Forest Service, has worked jointly with the Forest Service, and played a key role in project development, analysis and implementation. The project was developed under the Good Neighbor Authority (GNA), where the DNRC partners with the USDA Forest Service to plan and implement forest restoration projects and address shared priorities. GNA accelerates forest restoration and management, improves forest health and resiliency, reduces fuels and wildfire threats to communities, improves wildlife and fisheries habitat, and provides a timber supply to support Montana's forest products industry.

The Forest Service began public engagement in May 2018, which resulted in the Rancho Deluxe Working Group. The Forest Service and the working group organized a series of public meetings to incorporate the working group's input at key phases of project development. The proposed action described in this scoping document is a result of this collaborative effort.

The project activities were developed based on forest stand health and fuels management needs, as well as feedback received during public engagement and collaboration opportunities for input about the project area and potential needs for management action. Throughout the development process, potential treatment units were refined through interdisciplinary team coordination to ensure compliance with the Healthy Forest Restoration Act Insect and Disease Resiliency Categorical Exclusion, as well as the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest Land Management Plan and other applicable laws and regulations. All treatment units are within the Powell County Wildfire Protection Plan designated area (wildland-urban interface), or if outside of this area, are within Vegetation Condition Classes 2 or 3 and are in Fire Regime Groups I, II, or III, as required by this authority.

The proposed action will improve forest resiliency throughout the project area by reducing fuel loads, modifying and increasing vegetation patch size diversity, promoting underrepresented tree species and size classes, and increasing the amount of early successional forest habitats. The lodgepole pine salvage treatments will decrease insect and disease vulnerability by reducing the most susceptible lodgepole pine size class, while reducing existing down woody fuel loads that have resulted from severe insect infestations, breaking up the continuity of fuels to allow more expedient suppression actions.

While this project will not accomplish all of the goals and desired conditions outlined in the 2009 Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest Plan (Forest Plan), the proposed activities are designed to move the area toward the desired future conditions and maintain and improve the functions of multiple resource areas, as included in the Forest Plan.

DECISION

I have decided to implement the proposed action to meet the purpose and needs of the project area. Design criteria and implementation strategies incorporated into this decision are included under the project activities described in this document. A map showing project activities described here is found on page 17, Appendix A. My decision includes:

Vegetation and fuels treatment activities cover a total of 1,940 acres in 38 units.

- Commercial timber harvest of 1,058 acres.
    - Salvage cuts on 713 acres.
    - Thinning on 345 acres.
- Removal of encroaching conifer from aspen stands.
    - Non-commercial aspen treatments on 882 acres.
- Prescribed burning (e.g. broadcast, jackpot, or pile burning) will be conducted, as warranted, following treatments as a method to naturally reduce high levels of woody debris or to encourage regeneration in some stands.
- Construct approximately 5.8 miles of temporary roads to facilitate treatment implementation.
    - 4.5 miles of new temporary roads will be constructed for access to treatment units.
    - 1.3 miles of temporary road will be constructed on an existing undetermined route.

No new permanent roads will be created. Road maintenance required to implement the project will be included to ensure roads are maintained to meet standards.

COMMERCIAL AND NON-COMMERCIAL TREATMENTS

Salvage Cuts

This project will involve approximately 713 acres of salvage cuts in lodgepole pine stands. This treatment will remove all overstory lodgepole pine within the units. This treatment will salvage dead, dying, and diseased or infested trees while retaining seedling and sapling stands of mixed species including lodgepole, spruce, Douglas-fir and subalpine fir. Post-treatment conditions will meet forest

management stocking criteria of a minimum of 150 trees per acre (seedlings and saplings that would grow into healthy overstory trees in the future and retained overstory trees that will remain on site). Salvage treatments in lodgepole pine stands will decrease beetle hazard by reducing the most susceptible size class, while reducing existing down woody fuel loadings that have resulted from severe insect infestations, breaking up the continuity of fuels to allow more expedient suppression actions. Patches of Douglas-fir, lodgepole pine, spruce, and subalpine fir may be thinned to reduce competition pressure, leaving vigorous, larger individuals to provide stand-level diversity. Treatments will recover economic value that would be otherwise lost, reduce incidence of insects and disease, increase vigor of the released stand, and create stands less prone to catastrophic fire loss. Use of fire in salvage units will be restricted to jackpot and pile burning to protect existing advanced regeneration. Salvage cuts will leave:

- A minimum of 150 crop trees per acre (seedlings and saplings that will grow into healthy overstory trees in the future, and existing overstory trees that will remain on site for the near future).

- A minimum of 60 percent of the stand area at adequate stocking levels and an overstory of mistletoe infection rating of 2 or less using the standard mistletoe rating system.

Minor inclusions of aspen clones that occur in salvage units may be treated by removal of conifer species within the clone and within two tree lengths (150 feet).

Table 1. Salvage Units

Unit Number	Acres	Treatment Description
S410	14	Salvage Cut
S420	46	Salvage Cut
S440	225	Salvage Cut
S450	19	Salvage Cut
S460	5	Salvage Cut
S470	62	Salvage Cut
S480	13	Salvage Cut
S490	10	Salvage Cut
S500	3	Salvage Cut
S510	9	Salvage Cut
S520	11	Salvage Cut
S530	18	Salvage Cut
S540	17	Salvage Cut
S550	24	Salvage Cut
S560	16	Salvage Cut
S570	24	Salvage Cut
S580	35	Salvage Cut
S600	136	Salvage Cut
S610	26	Salvage Cut
Total	**713**	N/A

Figure 1. *Typical lodgepole pine stand with large amounts of standing dead trees and woody debris observed within the project area (left); desired condition for lodgepole pine with recruitment of 0- to 5-inch diameter size class (right).*

COMMERCIAL THINNING

Approximately 345 acres of commercial thinning treatments will be conducted in Douglas-fir dominated stands. A commercial thin is an intermediate harvest treatment with the objective of reducing stand density primarily to improve growth and enhance forest health, favoring retention of Douglas-fir. Treatment can recover potential mortality while producing merchantable material. Thinning will occur in areas with a target basal area of approximately 40 to 80 square feet per acre. These stands include other tree species which are dead and dying and may also be removed. Some units may receive a post-logging under burn.

Minor inclusions of aspen clones that occur in thinning units may be treated by removal of conifer species within the clone and within two tree lengths (150 feet).

Table 2. Commercial Thinning Units.

Unit Number	Acres	Treatment Description
T200	78	Commercial Thin to 40 – 80sf BA
T210	41	Commercial Thin to 40 – 80sf BA
T220	38	Commercial Thin to 40 – 80sf BA
T230	54	Commercial Thin to 40 – 80sf BA
T240	42	Commercial Thin to 40 – 80sf BA
T250	33	Commercial Thin to 40 – 80sf BA
T255	30	Commercial Thin to 40 – 80sf BA
T260	3	Commercial Thin to 40 – 80sf BA
T270	13	Commercial Thin to 40 – 80sf BA
T290	13	Commercial Thin to 40 – 80sf BA
Total	**345**	N/A

Aspen Treatments

Aspen treatments will consist of removing conifers that have encroached into aspen dominated stands to reverse their encroachment and reduce overtopping and competition. Chainsaws or similar hand equipment will be used to remove conifers inside aspen clones as well as within two tree lengths (150 feet) from the edge of the aspen sprouts on approximately 882 acres. Prescribed burning could consist of broadcast, jackpot or pile burning depending on site conditions.

Table 3. Non-commercial Aspen Treatment Units

Unit Number	Acres	Treatment Description
A110	184	Aspen - reduce conifer encroachment
A120	32	Aspen - reduce conifer encroachment
A130	83	Aspen - reduce conifer encroachment
A140	138	Aspen - reduce conifer encroachment
A150	85	Aspen - reduce conifer encroachment
A160	257	Aspen - reduce conifer encroachment
A170	50	Aspen - reduce conifer encroachment
A180	36	Aspen - reduce conifer encroachment
A190	17	Aspen - reduce conifer encroachment
Total	**882**	N/A

Figure 2. *Aspen stand with limited recruitment and conifer encroachment, observed in the project area (left); desired condition of aspen with a variety of age classes with successful recruitment (right).*

TEMPORARY ROADS AND ACCESS FOR TREATMENTS

Access to the project area for implementation of treatments will utilize existing public roads, highways and National Forest System roads. Approximately 4.5 miles of new temporary roads will be constructed to facilitate access to currently inaccessible areas. Additionally, 1 mile of temporary road will be maintained on an undetermined road (UR8-238) which will be decommissioned upon project

completion. Approximately 0.3 miles of temporary road will be maintained on an undetermined road (UR8-239) which will be obliterated upon project completion. Refer to page 17, Appendix A. for the proposed locations of temporary roads; however, exact locations and layouts of temporary roads may differ from those depicted on the map based on site-specific conditions. Temporary roads will generally be designed to fit to existing topography and avoid sensitive areas (for example, wetlands, streams, etcetera). Except for UR8-239, all existing roads used for the project will be stabilized and returned to the current use and designation level. No new permanent roads will be constructed or added to the forest transportation system.

New temporary roads will be fully obliterated after completion of thinning and salvage treatments. All temporary roads will be closed to public use, and only open for project operations and Forest Service administrative use, throughout the project activities.

Mitigation Measures and Design Features

Several design criteria were developed through public engagement and interdisciplinary team coordination to ensure compliance with the Forest Plan standards and other laws, regulations, and policy. A full disclosure of applicable Forest Plan standards, as well as a review of Plan Goals and Objectives associated with implementing this project can be found in the project file. Below are project-specific design criteria for this project which are the primary means for ensuring compliance with the Forest Plan standards:

Forest Vegetation

- All snags greater than 15 inches in diameter will be retained. An additional average of 5.7 live trees per acre greater than 15 inches in diameter will also be left across treatment units, to provide for future snag retention and to comply with Forest Plan Wildlife Standard 3.

Soils

- Harvest and skidding equipment will be restricted from operating in areas with greater than 35 percent average slope except for short pitches not to exceed 40 percent unless the site is reviewed by a FS Soil Scientist. Uphill skidding should be minimized on slopes over 25 percent in order to reduce rutting, topsoil displacement, and compaction.

- Mechanical equipment will not enter meadows adjacent to harvest areas at any time of year, unless on a temporary road, to limit unnecessary soil damage resulting from compaction, rutting, spread of noxious weeds, as well as to minimize the potential for off road vehicle (ORV) trespass.

- Summer harvest activities must be conducted over dry ground, as determined by Forest Officer. Winter-based operations will only occur when soils are frozen, as determined by a Forest Service representative, to minimize the potential for soil compaction and rutting. Where summer or fall harvest operations are used, if long duration precipitation events occur, operations will be halted temporarily to ensure soils are sufficiently dry for operations to resume.

- Where feasible, utilize old landings, user-created unauthorized roads or areas of unspecified disturbance in lieu of creating new landings or temporary roads in undisturbed terrain.

- Skid Trails will be designed to best fit the terrain to minimize erosion. Skid trails will be spaced an average of 75-100 feet apart.

- Landings will be located, shaped, and sized in such a manner to cause the least amount of soil disturbance, and to minimize runoff and erosion. Approved landing locations will meet the criteria of minimal size, least excavation needed, and minimum skid trails necessary.

- Temporary roads, skid trails and landings remaining during spring run-off will have slash placed on them to reduce higher erosion potential associated with that season. If slash is used for overwinter protection, it will be removed before remediation.

- All newly constructed temporary roads and landings will be closed to public use and obliterated upon project completion. Obliterating will consist of re-contouring the road prism, including all cut and fill slopes. Logging slash, stumps, and woody debris will be placed on top of obliterated road corridors to effectively prevent unauthorized vehicle travel and discourage use by livestock. Where re-contouring is unnecessary, or where detrimental soil disturbance has occurred on skid trails, traveled surface will be scarified to a depth sufficient to ameliorate the presence of detrimental soil compaction (usually between 2 and 12 inches).

- Existing, decommissioned roads identified for use on this project will be analyzed as temporary roads (with associated disturbance). If opened for use, these temporary roads will be decommissioned to their former status as closed or impassible after implementation. Road decommissioning includes a variety of treatments to block the road, revegetate the road surface, restore surface drainage, remove crossing structures and fills, mitigate road surface compaction, re-establish drainageways, remove unstable road embankments, and recontour the surface to restore natural slopes.

- Disturbed sites, such as temporary road corridors, landings and some skid trails may be revegetated using seed recommended by the Forest Botanist if natural revegetation is inadequate. Seeding would be conducted as soon as feasible after the completion of operations to prevent the spread of noxious weeds.

- Prescribed burning will be conducted based on weather and site-specific conditions and will take place under the guidelines in a prescribed fire burn plan developed specifically for this project area. Prescribed burns are generally timed for spring or fall when soil moisture is high to promote effective management at low to moderate intensities.

HERITAGE

Site-specific mitigation measures, for the eligible site, were developed in consultation with the Montana State Historic Preservation Office [MT SHPO] (Forest Service and MT SHPO letters in project record).

- Sites within or near the Aspen Enhancement Units, cut conifers will either be scattered or piled outside the site buffer for concentrated burning.

- If an inadvertent discovery of cultural properties or human remains occurs during any ground disturbing activities, project work in the area shall stop and the Forest archaeologist will be notified immediately. Project activities will not resume until consultation is complete and all agreed-upon actions and mitigation measures are implemented.

- No mechanized equipment will cross site 24PW1162. The equipment operator will be allowed to reach within site boundary to remove trees.

PUBLIC SAFETY

Signs will be used to warn dispersed recreation users of travel impacts during summer and fall.

SCENERY

For work within the immediate foreground (up to 300 feet) from the Doney Lake Road:

- Cut stumps 6 inches or less, roughly parallel to the ground surface.
- Avoid leaving visually dominant piles of slash.
- After burning piles scatter any remaining slash to mask the burned ring.
- Use broadcast or jackpot burning, where possible to mute the bright color of cut stumps where there are concentrations of visually dominant cut stumps.

For parts of units that would be visible on ground tilted towards viewers on the Doney Lake Road (visibility analysis is based upon topographic blocking only)

- Create transition zones between the cut and adjacent uncut areas by shaping and feathering the edges of cut areas. Avoid creating or leaving any visually dominant straight lines. Where cutting or thinning is adjacent to currently open or meadow areas, cutting and thinning should be increased. Where the adjacent area is dense forest, cutting and thinning should be reduced to create an effective transition.
- Avoid creating multiple, small, similar sized and or geometrically spaced openings. Where possible, create larger openings with natural-appearing shaped edges. Aim to replicate the size and shape of natural opening in the area.
- Leave a few clumps of trees on the west side of the project roads that cross through units S420 and S440 to break up the road line that may become visible from the Doney Lake Road.

SENSITIVE PLANTS

- To the extent possible, whitebark pine of all size classes will be protected from damage. This may include ensuring that designated equipment trails avoid whitebark pine and trees are directionally felled away when possible.

- Generally, conifers within 10-20 feet of living whitebark pine will be cut.
- Whitebark pine will be protected from potential fire mortality in prescribed burning areas through techniques such as directional felling of trees away from whitebark pine, reducing fuel loads adjacent to whitebark pine by pulling slash away 10 to 20 feet depending on tree size, and designing ignition patterns to limit fire intensity to whitebark pine individuals. Fuels will be arranged to avoid scorching whitebark pine trees in the vicinity and target seedlings and saplings of competing tree species, such as subalpine fir, where practical.
- No noxious weed herbicide treatment will be applied within a 100-foot buffer of any sensitive plant population, in accordance with the Noxious Weed Forest Wide EIS (USDA 1994).
- If previously undocumented populations of sensitive plants listed on the Regional Forester's Sensitive Species List are encountered, the Purchaser shall immediately notify the Forest Officer.

HYDROLOGY, AQUATIC SPECIES

- All work will comply with Montana Streamside Management Zone (SMZ) Law and Rules:
  - SMZ boundaries will be defined as: 50 feet from the Ordinary High Water Mark (OHWM) for Class 1 and 2 streams. For slopes greater than 35 percent, the SMZ boundary will extend to 100 feet. For Class 3 streams the SMZ is 50 feet regardless of slope.
  - Tree retention guidelines in SMZs will follow SMZ Rule Number 5. Additionally, a fisheries biologist or hydrologist will work with the marking crew to designate leave trees. The purpose is to retain any trees outside of the riparian area that are tall enough to be recruited to the channel and floodplain and that are leaning in the proper direction.
  - Ground-based equipment will be prohibited from entering SMZs without the appropriate variance from Montana DNRC (SMZ Rule Number 4).
- No treatment will occur within those areas meeting a functional definition of a riparian area. This includes areas within the hydrologic zone of influence of streams characterized by riparian vegetation.
  - Delineation of riparian areas will be done in consultation with a Forest Service fisheries biologist or hydrologist. Streams are defined as, "a natural water-course of perceptible extent that has a generally sandy or rocky bottom or definite banks and that confines and conducts continuously or intermittently flowing water."
  - Riparian areas for streams with relatively wide floodplains may be wider than the SMZ.
- Additional mitigations:
  - Generally, there will be no fuel storage, mixing of fuels, or refueling equipment in riparian areas. If there are no alternatives, refueling in riparian areas may occur, but must be pre-approved by the fisheries biologist or hydrologist, and will include an approved spill containment plan.

- Temporary roads will not enter riparian areas except where necessary to cross streams or wetlands with appropriate permits.

- Avoid direct effects to native fish, fish habitat, and risks associated with aquatic invasive species.
  - Prior to entering the project area all equipment that has the potential to come into contact with water must be inspected, clean and dry. Do not transfer any water, sediment, or vegetation when moving between drafting sites.
  - If drafting from streams occurs, intake hoses will be fitted with a screen mesh equal to or smaller than 3/32 inch.

TERRESTRIAL WILDLIFE SPECIES

- Retain any multi-story, mature lynx habitat of 1 acre or more, as defined by Northern Rockies Lynx Management Direction (USDA Forest Service, 2007), if found during timber sale unit layout.
- Prior to implementation, surveys in aspen will be conducted by a qualified individual to ensure snowshoe hare habitat as described in Veg S6 will be maintained and excluded from treatment. In instances where aspen is encroached with multi-storied mature or late successional forest, no treatment will occur if horizontal cover measurements in the summer are greater than or equal to 48 percent or greater than or equal to 38 percent in the winter.
- All timber sale activities, including burning, may use forest roads yearlong, with a few exceptions. No operations would be allowed during elk calving period (April 1-June 15) on FSRs 1527 and 5150.
- Aspen implementation will follow the seasonal restrictions as described on the 2013 Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest Visitor's Map.
- If active nest sites for threatened, endangered or sensitive bird species (including northern goshawks and great gray owls) are found before or during implementation, effects of management actions will be mitigated through application of limited operating periods as prescribed by a Forest Service wildlife biologist, based on species needs and site-specific considerations.
- Units A110 and A170 require flammulated owl surveys prior to implementation. If nests are found, refer to and follow the project design feature for sensitive bird species.
- The Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest food storage order will be implemented during implementation of project activities to reduce potential conflicts with bears. The food storage order can be found on the Be Bear Aware website.
- Natural barriers removed during harvest that serve to block vehicle travel around road closures will be replaced or fortified as needed to ensure travel restrictions are maintained.

EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES

I find there are no extraordinary circumstances that warrant further analysis and documentation in an EA or EIS. I took into account resource conditions identified in agency procedures that should be considered in determining whether extraordinary circumstances might exist for federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species.

FEDERALLY LISTED THREATENED OR ENDANGERED SPECIES

Wildlife

The proposed action in combination with the environmental baseline "may affect and is not likely to adversely affect" the grizzly bear. The project may potentially displace transient grizzly bears from areas that they may have used otherwise for a period of 3 to 5 years due to disturbance. These effects are expected to be insignificant because the amount of grizzly bear use is suspected to be low, if any at all. There is no denning habitat in the project area and there is a very large (17,804 acres) secure area in the southern portion of the analysis area for grizzlies to move into. The project area itself is a small portion (5 percent) of the grizzly bear analysis area. Additionally, the project is located entirely outside the grizzly bear recovery zone, but within an area where grizzly bears may be present. The proposed action meets applicable direction in the Forest Plan and guidelines and reporting requirements from the associated Forest Plan Biological Opinion.

The proposed action in combination with the environmental baseline "may affect and is not likely to adversely affect" the Canada lynx. No Canada lynx Critical Habitat has been designated on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest. Only 0.8 percent of the lynx habitat within the analysis area would be affected by project treatments. Only 2 percent of the stand initiation foraging habitat would be affected by treatments which is allowed under the Veg S5 exception Number 4 (aspen). The project would only affect 0.7 percent of potential denning habitat and denning habitat is not limiting within the analysis area. Effects to lynx habitat are insignificant. Planned treatments have the potential to improve snowshoe hare and red squirrel habitat conditions in the future. The project maintains a mosaic of forest structures and successional stages, which is the conservation measure described in the revised LCAS for vegetation management in secondary areas (Interagency Lynx Biology Team 2013). There are no recent verified observations of lynx within the action area and lynx are not expected to occur in the analysis area during any activity and any project effects would be unlikely. The project does not impede lynx movement and does not reduce habitat connectivity in identified linkage areas. All treatments comply with the Northern Rockies Lynx Management Direction standards and guidelines, provide a mosaic of lynx habitat, and are not expected to preclude any future use of the area by lynx.

Aquatics

There are no federally listed threatened or endangered species within the project area.

Plants

There are no federally listed threatened or endangered species within the project area.

DESIGNATED CRITICAL HABITAT

Wildlife

There is no designated critical habitat within the project area.

Aquatics

There is no designated critical habitat within the project area.

Plants

There is no designated critical habitat within the project area.

SPECIES PROPOSED FOR LISTING

Wildlife

There are no wildlife species proposed for listing within the project area.

Aquatics

There are no aquatic species proposed for listing within the project area.

Plants

Whitebark pine: The proposed action is ***not likely to jeopardize*** the continued existence of whitebark pine. Only seedling size trees were found during project surveys in limited portions of the analysis area. Habitat conducive to the establishment of stands with a major whitebark pine component does not exist within treatment units, due to the low elevation range of the project area. Proposed activities would not increase any of the primary stressors of whitebark pine: white pine blister rust, mountain pine beetle, altered fire regimes, or the effects of climate change; but would rather decrease the likelihood of another landscape level mountain pine beetle epidemic and reduce the potential for catastrophic fire by introducing greater heterogeneity to the landscape.

SENSITIVE SPECIES

Wildlife

Due to either habitat modification or disturbance from project activities, the proposed action 'may impact individuals or habitat but will not likely contribute to a trend towards Federal listing or cause a loss of viability to the population or species' for the following sensitive species: black-backed woodpecker, fisher, flammulated owl and gray wolf. Required project design criteria will reduce the potential effects to these species or their habitats. There will be 'no impact' to any other sensitive terrestrial wildlife species from this proposed action.

Aquatics

There are two sensitive species found within the project area: westslope cutthroat trout and the western toad. Forest Plan standards, State SMZ laws and BMPs will protect riparian areas where those species may be found and result in a no impact determination for these species.

Plants

Whitebark pine – addressed above as Species Proposed for Listing.

FLOOD PLAINS, WETLANDS, OR MUNICIPAL WATERSHEDS

All floodplains and wetlands will be buffered according to a minimum of State SMZ laws that will protect the resource. There are no municipal watersheds in within the project area.

CONGRESSIONALLY DESIGNATED AREAS SUCH AS WILDERNESS, WILDERNESS STUDY AREAS, OR NATIONAL RECREATION AREAS

There are no extraordinary circumstances related to these resources because they are not present in the project area, as stated in Number 3 of the *Applicable Categorical Exclusion* section of this document.

INVENTORIED ROADLESS AREAS OR POTENTIAL WILDERNESS AREAS

The project area is not within a Research Natural Area, Wilderness, or Inventoried Roadless Area. It is adjacent to the Dolus Lakes IRA (10,386 acres), but no activities would occur within the IRA boundary. An unroaded area was identified (see IRA map) within the project boundaries, and it was evaluated for size and potential contribution to preservation of the characteristics of the Dolus Lake IRA. There may be short-term effects on solitude in this unroaded area, but no other roadless characteristics would be impacted, and at project end the roadless characteristics in this unroaded area would be maintained.

RESEARCH NATURAL AREAS

There are no Research Natural Areas within the project area boundaries.

AMERICAN INDIANS AND ALASKA NATIVE RELIGIOUS OR CULTURAL SITES

The cultural resource surveys were completed, and no American Indian cultural sites were located.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES, OR HISTORIC PROPERTIES OR AREAS

BDNF Heritage staff have completed Section 106 compliance consultation with the Montana State Historical Preservation Office (MT SHPO) and have received SHPO's concurrence the Rancho Deluxe Project as planned and subsequently described in the heritage program report to the MT SHPO poses no adverse effect to the identified historic cultural sites. A copy of MT SHPO letter of concurrence, dated December 2, 2019, is available in the project record.

COLLABORATION, SCOPING AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

For the Rancho Deluxe Vegetation Project, the responsible official opted to use a collaborative process that included multiple interested persons representing diverse interests that was transparent and non-exclusive, as required by the Healthy Forest Restoration Act, Section 603(b)(1)(C)(i) and (ii)(I).

The following information demonstrates how the responsible official: identified and involved relevant stakeholders early in the process; developed a strategy to conduct a non-exclusive and transparent collaboration process; and planned for development and implementation of the project as part of the collaborative effort.

COLLABORATION

The Rancho Deluxe Vegetation Project was planned through a collaborative effort that was transparent and nonexclusive. Public notification was initiated in April of 2018 through a public media release and a postcard mailed to the public mailing list, which includes multiple interest groups, Tribal leaders, government agencies, and Powell County Commissioners and stakeholders. A public open house was held May 10th, 2018 at the Deerlodge Community Center to present and discuss the project. Public working group meetings were held on June 12th and September 27th, 2018 to gather public input, facilitate working group collaboration, and develop the project with support from the interdisciplinary team.

SCOPING & PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The project was originally listed in April of 2019 as a proposed project on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest Status of Proposed Actions and updated periodically during the analysis process. Scoping for the project was conducted March 15th, 2018 through April 15th, 2018 and was publicly announced using postcard mailings and listing on the Status of Proposed Actions. Parties contacted included multiple interest groups from recreation, conservation, business and industry. Comments were received from representatives of each of these groups. One specific comment noted an error in the acreages listed for treatment within the project. This identified a need to make adjustments to the proposal and conduct a scoping period to include the public in these changes. A second scoping period was conducted October 1-30, 2019, which included changes in treatment unit acreage and a refined proposed action for public comment. By October 30, 2019, 13 total comment letters were received from both scoping periods. Most comments were centered on wildlife and vegetation concerns. Other comments focused on climate change, inventoried roadless areas, the Montana Governor's Priority Forest Landscapes, noxious weeds, endangered rare plants, fire, and the need to treat more acres. Public input was reviewed by the interdisciplinary team and considered in the planning and analysis of the proposed action.

APPLICABLE CATEGORICAL EXCLUSION

BACKGROUND

Section 8204 of the Agriculture Act of 2014 (Public Law 113-79) (also referred to as the Farm Bill) amended Title VI of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 (HFRA) (16 U.S.C. 6591 et seq.) to add Sections 602 and 603 to address qualifying insect and disease infestations on National Forest System lands. The Secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture delegated authority to implement the provisions of the Farm Bill to the Chief of the Forest Service on March 6, 2014.

Section 602 provides, in part, the opportunity for Governors to request designation to areas in their State that are experiencing, or at risk of, an insect or disease epidemic. The Forest Service received letters from 35 states requesting designations. These requests were reviewed to ensure they met at least one of the following eligibility criteria outlined in the Farm Bill: experiencing forest health decline based on annual forest health surveys; at risk of experiencing substantially increased tree mortality based on the most recent Forest Health Protection Insect and Disease Risk Map; or contains hazard trees that pose an imminent risk to public infrastructure, health, or safety.

Upon reviewing the States' requests, the Chief designated approximately 45.6 million acres of National Forest System lands across 94 national forests in 35 States. Over 6.6 million acres were designated in the Northern Region (1,708,628 million acres in Idaho; 4,955,159 million acres in Montana). These areas will be further evaluated to identify potential projects that reduce the risk or extent of, or increase resilience to, insect and disease infestations. Information on the request and designation process, by state, can be found at *http://www.fs.fed.us/farmbill/areadesignations.shtml*.

Section 603 establishes a categorical exclusion for qualifying insect and disease projects in designated areas on National Forest System lands. An insect and disease project that may be categorically excluded under this authority is a project that is designed to reduce the risk or extent of, or increase the resilience to, insect or disease infestation in the areas (HFRA, Sections 602(d) and 603(a)).

INSECT & DISEASE INFESTATION CATEGORICAL EXCLUSION

This categorical exclusion may be used to carry out a collaborative restoration project in an insect and disease treatment area designated by the Chief under sections 602 and 603. The applicable category of actions is identified in agency procedures Forest Service Handbook 1909.15, Chapter 30, Section 32.3 (Categories Established by Statute), Number 3. Insect and Disease Infestation.

The actions proposed for this project are categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement (EIS) or an environmental assessment (EA). The Insect and Disease Infestation category is applicable for this project because the project is in an area designated in accordance with section 602(b) and (c) of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act. Portions of the project are in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) and those portions outside the WUI are in Condition Classes 2 or 3, Fire Regime Groups I, II, or III. The project is not located: in congressionally designated Wilderness and Wilderness Study Areas; in areas where the removal of vegetation is restricted or prohibited by statute or by Presidential proclamation; or in areas where the activities described above are inconsistent with the applicable Land and Resource Management Plan. The project's number of acres treated does not exceed 3,000 acres. Temporary roads will be constructed but will be decommissioned or obliterated after project activities are completed. Maintenance or repairs will be conducted on permanent roads that are already established in the project area. Public notice and scoping were conducted throughout the project. The project was developed through a collaborative process that includes multiple interested persons representing diverse interests and is transparent and non-exclusive. The best available scientific information is considered to maintain or restore ecological integrity, including maintaining or restoring the structure, function, composition, and connectivity. The project maximizes the retention of old growth and large trees, as appropriate for the forest type, to the extent that the trees promote stands that are resilient to insect and disease.

FINDINGS RELATED TO OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS

This decision is consistent with the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest Land Management Plan. The project was designed in conformance with Forest Plan direction relevant to vegetation and fuels management activities. This project is also consistent with applicable laws and regulations, including, but not limited to, National Environmental Policy Act, National Forest Management Act, Endangered Species Act, National Historical Preservation Act, Clean Water Act, Wilderness Act of 1964, Organic Act of 1897, and 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule.

ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OPPORTUNITIES

This decision is not subject to administrative review, appeal, or objection.

IMPLEMENTATION DATE

The project can be implemented immediately.

CONTACT

For additional information concerning this decision, contact: Daniel Pliley, NEPA Strike Team Leader, Northern Region, 10 E. Babcock Street, Bozeman, MT 59715; Email: daniel.pliley@usda.gov; Phone: 406-587-6892

May 7th, 2021

CAMERON L RASOR, District Ranger

Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest, Pintler Ranger District

APPENDIX A. PROJECT DECISION MAP